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ABSTRACT

Many minority languages are unwritten, undocumented, and thus considered unsuitable for institutional communication and for inclusion in national literacy campaigns. Literacy should be set in a context that puts the local people at the center of the process, respects their cultural identity, and enables them to set their own agenda for socioeconomic and cultural development. Within such an orientation, literacy in minority languages finds its justification, since it will enable genuine two-way communication in which local self-expression is at least as important as the transmission of information and messages to the local community. Issues related to minority language literacy include the following: (1) many languages have only hundreds of speakers; (2) many of these languages are marginal to the mainstream of national life; (3) some people think minority language literacy impedes national unity; (4) some people favor a national language; and (5) resources for developing minority language literacy are limited. Minority language use is inappropriate as preparation for higher education, national-level administration, and employment in national institutions. The process of introducing literacy into a community whose language is an unwritten minority language involves a basic research phase, a student motivational phase, the phase during which the program is implemented, and a phase in which local trained personnel provide materials for neoliterate people. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Literacy in minority languages: what hope?

by Clinton D.W. Robinson

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INTRODUCTION

Minority peoples have frequently come off second best as far as literacy goes. Not that literacy campaigns have deliberately ignored them, but that the distinctiveness of minorities has been left out of the planning, and nowhere more so than in the matter of language. This paper will explore this problem by examining:
(1) the *parameters:* communication, languages and literacy from a minority perspective;
(2) the *purposes*: what use is literacy in a minority language?
(3) the *processes*: how might a literacy programme in an unwritten language be established?
(4) *participatory structures*: how can a minority group be involved in promoting its own language for literacy?

PARAMETERS

Minorities and communication

Much concern has been expressed in the social sciences for the plight of minority peoples, whether immigrant minorities in Europe and North America, indigenous peoples in Latin America and Australasia, or the minority groups of rural areas in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. This concern has focused on economic and social deprivation, exclusion from political power and lack of respect for cultural identity. In recent years, particularly in developing countries, much thought has been devoted to elaborating appropriate strategies to correct the imbalance in social relationships which works to the

disadvantage of minorities – strategies which seek to empower, to restore confidence, to create a climate for initiative and hope, and to make it possible for minorities to become masters of their own development.

Language has always been recognised as one of the distinctive features of such groups, though it has not figured centrally in the debate on how best to work for their appropriate development. This is a serious omission when communication – to which language is essential – is crucial to the process of empowerment. Interaction, feedback and dialogue within the group and between the group and outsiders (change agents, governments, and so on) must characterise strategies aimed at people-centred development. Whether in oral or written communication, the language of the minority group has frequently been passed over.

Languages

Many minority languages are unwritten, undocumented and thus considered unsuitable for any institutional communication. As matters stand, they *are* of course unsuitable, but the linguistic dimension of communication is important enough that the consequences of leaving these languages in their present state need to be considered. Where communication takes place in the language which belongs to an élite, not only is interaction restricted to those of the minority group

A PROBLEM OF TERMINOLOGY

The term 'national language' means different things to different people. For some, it indicates a language which is used over the whole national territory and is the language chosen by the nation. For others it means languages originating in the country, as opposed to imported, usually colonial languages; these national languages rarely cover the entire territory. In this paper national language indicates a language used over the whole country as opposed to local languages.

who have learned that language, but it is inferred that the message has little to do with daily concerns. Many minority languages around the world have been the objects of linguistic research, but this has not often led to practical results, such as the preparation of the language and the community for literacy.

Literacy

It is well known that literacy can be a liberating or an enslaving force, depending on the use to which it is put. This is also the case for literacy in minority languages, and our plea is to set such literacy in a broader context of a strategy for development which puts the local people at the centre of the process, respects their cultural identity, and enables them to set their own agenda for socio-economic and cultural development.

Lest there be any confusion, to advocate minority-language literacy is tantamount to advocating mother-tongue literacy, and that is what is explicitly envisaged in this paper. Note that I am not arguing here for an atomisation of nations into their separate ethnic groups, but rather for a recognition of their identity as a part of national policy.

Within such an orientation literacy in minority languages finds its justification, since it will enable genuine two-way communication, where local feedback and self-expression are at least as important as the transmission of information and messages to the local community.

The emphasis in this paper will be on adult literacy, though reference will be made to the formal education system. Examples will be drawn mostly from Cameroon, a country of some 240 different languages where the official languages are French and English; no one ethnic group represents more than about 5% of the total population, so every language might be con-

sidered a minority language from a numerical standpoint, and certainly from the point of view of the dominance of the official languages in institutional communication. Before describing a possible process for minority-language literacy, a number of general issues must be addressed.

- *ISSUE 1: MANY LANGUAGES, FEW SPEAKERS*

Grimes' (1988) listing of the languages of the world gives a total of 6170; it is estimated that 90% of the world's population speak a total of only 100 languages, so it is clear that the groups speaking the other 6000 plus must be relatively small. Even so, some minority language groups number in the millions, such as the Tuareg of West Africa. Others number only hundreds, as in the case of Latin American Indian groups. Brazil, for example, has 152 languages, but 99.8% of the population speak one language, Portuguese, so the remaining 151 are spread over only 0.2% of the people. Similarly small groups can be found in many multilingual nations, such as Papua New Guinea where the largest language group represents only 3% of the population. The implication for minority groups is clear and well-known: in the government of nations, the voice of small numbers of people is less well heard than that of majority groups.

> *... when a society is denied full expression through the language which it uses naturally and its needs are instead sought to be met through a regulated or imposed language, then inequity sets in.*
>
> D.P. Pattanayak (India) 1985.

- *ISSUE 2: MARGINALIZATION*

Compounding the strictly numerical subordination of minority groups is a range of factors which contribute to their marginalization from the mainstream of na-

tional life, socio-economic development and political power. Geographical isolation, economic deprivation or exploitation, the presence of culturally alien media, lack of educational opportunity – such factors keep minority groups at a disadvantage and constitute overwhelming barriers. Language is not often adduced as a factor, but can in itself further isolate a group. Whether a minority language is ignored or suppressed for the sake of national considerations, or whether it is, in spite of the best intentions, overshadowed by a language of wider communication, the language group finds itself in a disadvantaged position. By design or by neglect therefore, a language may be marginalized from the process of communication and this may compound the marginalization of the people themselves.

• *ISSUE 3: NATIONAL UNITY*

Independent developing nations are rightly concerned to promote national unity and to harness human resources in the country to the task of national development. Along the lines of the 'older' nations, where nationhood has frequently come to be characterized by the use of one national language over the whole territory, the attempt was made in multilingual nations to promote one nationally used language. This had the dual purpose of providing one medium of communication for national institutions – education, administration, etc. – and of constituting a symbol of national unity. The United Republic of Tanzania has actively promoted Kiswahili in this way.

The question we must ask is therefore the following; to what extent is literacy in minority languages incompatible with the goal of national unity? Fears that the promotion of the language of an ethnic minority was equivalent to according special political privilege to that group have abated somewhat in recent years; there is increasing recognition that the *communication* problems of minorities must be addressed for their own sake.

These problems lead to the development of minority languages at the local level, while the national language is used for wider communication. In multilingual nations, the use of different languages must be complementary, rather than exclusive. Transition to the national language is facilitated when rooted in literacy in the local language – a pedagogically sound process.

• *ISSUE 4: MULTILINGUALISM*

In multilingual countries, bi- and multilingualism amongst the population are often the basis of hopes for the eventual generalization of the national language, accompanied by a decline in the use of minority languages. While competence in more than one language should be the norm in a multilingual environment, bi- and multilingualism do not necessarily obviate the need for the development of minority languages. Levels of multlingualism must be *differentiated*: not all minority groups will exhibit the same levels, nor will the various social strata within specific groups (youth, women, etc.). The extent of coverage achieved by the school system poses a further problem. If hopes are centred on schooling as the means of promoting the national language, what success is achieved in terms of linguistic competence and of school attendance rates? Again, analysis of the problem must include differentiation by region, language and socio-economic status.

• *ISSUE 5: RESOURCES*

Even where a decision is made to develop and use minority languages, the problem of finding the resources to do so will be acute in developing countries, where so many urgent needs are clamouring for limited means. The establishment of a sustainable literacy programme in a minority language may take as long as ten years, and will require a significant investment of human and material resources. Linguists must be

trained and available to analyse languages; teaching and post-literacy materials must be prepared and teachers trained; local structures must be established to organize the literacy programme; regional and national consultants must be available to give specialist help. Only the political will to give priority to communication with and within minority groups will result in the allocation of adequate resources.

WHAT IS A MINORITY LANGUAGE?

Three major strands have been suggested as the elements constituting a minority:

- *numerical subordination;*
- *a relationship of political, economic or cultural subordination with respect to another community;*
- *a sense of deprivation or of lack of access to opportunity.*

For our purpose a minority language is one which belongs to a community demonstrating a subordinate relationship and/or a sense of deprivation. Minority status is more a matter of relationships than of numbers alone.

There are certain areas where the use of minority-language literacy seems inappropriate, or even if appropriate, unlikely ever to be realized; these are the higher levels of education, use in national-level administration and for employment in national institutions. At these levels the national language, as a common medium of communication, must be used. It is rather at the village level, for initial primary education and for communication in village-level development that minority languages are not only appropriate, but can be used to better effect than the national language. This is particularly true of village-level intervention where participatory goals and methods are in focus; such intervention might include the planning and implementation of rural development projects at the grass-roots level; health education; women's education as a basis, for example, of family income generation; cultural self-expression; the use of traditonal media; access to indigenous knowledge.

The case for initial primary education in the minority language has long been argued, following Unesco's advocacy of it in 1953. Suffice it here to give a recent example from Cameroon. A closely researched and supervised programme of education in the mother tongue for the first three years of primary school was launched in 1982 on an experimental basis by the University of Yaoundé. The aim was to ascertain the educational usefulness of the mother tongue and to test this by examining pupil performance, not only in the mother tongue but also in the national language, at the end of the 3 years, and again at the end of the primary cycle. In addition to positive results on these criteria, further benefits were noted: greater mental creativity amongst the pupils, greater pupil participation in class,

increased parental interest in their children's education and a decreased dichotomy between the school and the rest of the local community.

It is important to note that the initial primary education programme does not seek to **replace** *the national language by the minority language (mother tongue), but to increase educational effectiveness, including greater facility in the national language. Minority and national languages (and cultures therefore) are thus placed in a creative symbiotic relationship.*

Concern for the linguistic dimension of rural environments has lagged behind the growing emphasis on micro-level development. The realization that the only kind of development and social change which will be sustainable is that which involves the local people right from the start has led to the widespread use of participatory methods of intervention. As we argued earlier, these rely on communication processes, and particularly on creating the possibility for the local people to express themselves, on their own terms. This must surely mean that the local language is used, even where the numbers speaking it are small or where it is as yet unwritten and undeveloped. Such a micro-level approach must take the linguistic problem seriously by addressing it from the start, and by integrating the development of the language into the intervention goals. Indeed, as experiences in Ghana and Cameroon have shown, the very development of the language itself can lead to some of the intangible social benefits sought after by empowerment strategies: increased self-confidence and initiative, pride in local cultural heritage and a greater sense of equality with groups whose languages already have a literate tradition.

There are limitations to the usefulness of minority-language literacy, and it would be foolish in today's shrinking and interdependent world to pretend otherwise. However, the key to the balanced development of

Both in the educational and development fields, the use of the local language is tied up with the expression of the cultural identity of the people. President Paul Biya of Cameroon has spoken of the vertical integration of each individual into his own culture, through a conscious appreciation of his roots, and of a corresponding horizontal integration into national society, where each culture contributes on a wider level.

minority groups is the use of their languages, in literacy and other forms of communication, at the level where they are most effective.

PROCESSES

The process of introducing literacy into a community whose language is an unwritten minority language is radically different from working in an area where there is an established literary tradition, for two reasons. The first is simply that a system must be developed for writing the language in order for literacy to become possible; the second has to do with the fact that the community has hitherto used its language only for oral purposes, has therefore no indigenous tradition of reading and writing, and may have adopted certain negative attitudes towards its own language as a result.

A further contributory factor to such attitudes may be the prevailing subordinate relationship to the community speaking the dominant language. There are therefore two challenges to face, one technical, the other social. These challenges cannot, however, be separated in implementation, since the technical process takes place within the social environment and influences it; we will consider four phases in the process of minority-language literacy: basic research, the moti-

vational phase, the implementation phase and the independent phase.

Basic research

All literacy programmes require some research to establish the target group, the purposes literacy will serve, and what structures exist or need to be established to promote literacy. In addition to such enquiries, minority language literacy in an unwritten language requires a major investment in linguistic research. There is no short cut; attempts at literacy programmes in the local language, in Cameroon as elsewhere, have foundered on the reef of the basic linguistic research needed to turn a hitherto unwritten language into a viable instrument of written communication. Research must address the phonological and grammatical structure of the language, and bear in mind the educational demands of teaching and learning.

The motivational phase

Questions of motivation pertain to any kind of literacy, but minority communities have a particular barrier to overcome. Perhaps for generations they have been confronted with the fact that other languages may be used for written communication, while theirs is not. This can generate a feeling that their language *cannot* be written, and the intention or attempts to do so will be met with a good deal of initial scepticism, even when individual speakers may attach great personal value to their own language. Unless this problem is recognized at the start, it may lead to the abandonment of any effort in promoting literacy in a particular minority language on the grounds that 'the people do not want it, they see no purpose in it'. While the question of purpose needs to be investigated, the reported attitudes may rather reflect the belief that there is no possibility of writing the language – 'it can't be done'.

Building then on the foundation of adequate linguistic research, the first production of written material in the language is an opportunity to begin to motivate the community towards literacy. From such small beginnings, motivation can spread to a significant proportion of the language community. As more literature is produced, more possibilities for using literacy in the local language will become apparent to the local people, counteracting previous negative attitudes. Thus, during this phase of the programme, basic educational materials are produced: pre-primers, primers, post-primers, basic arithmetic books, and some initial post-literacy material. Along with such production goes the organization of literacy classes and training courses for local writers, both of an experimental nature.

The implementation phase

Once the foundation of proper research and of motivational activities has been laid, a literacy programme may begin to function in a more widespread manner, with a growing number of classes, continuing production of materials and the beginnings of an ongoing training effort. At this stage attention must be given to the strengthening of organizational links.

Given that the literacy programme provides an educational element for local development initiatives and plans, it is important that local institutions – government departments, aid agencies, non-governmental organizations, missions – begin to integrate minority-language literacy activities into their approach to village-level development. Their personnel must be involved in the planning of the location and timing of literacy classes, in the design and production of materials and media in the local language, and in the training of extension workers in the participatory methods of intervention which the use of the local language will greatly facilitate. Furthermore, organizations need to include the literacy element in the preparation of their

budgets – something that will happen only if literacy is fully integrated with other parts of their overall intervention strategy. Without such organizational support, the literacy programme will operate in a vacuum and will eventually wither from lack of relevance and usefulness.

The independent phase

The agent(s) of change – linguistic researcher, literacy specialist, adult educator – whose contribution was crucial in the previous three phases, take a less important role at the independent phase, eventually leaving in place adequate numbers of trained local personnel, with access to the production facilities needed to maintain the flow of post-literacy materials. Institutional support is assured locally, and further ongoing training needs met at a regional or national level. It is important that a local programme is linked to other minority-language initiatives elswehere in the country for mutual support, cross-fertilization and the pooling of training resources. A network of language/literacy committees might at this stage be established.

PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURES

Reference has been made to language and literacy committees; these are local structures which must be developed if minority-language literacy is to move beyond isolated experiments and become a community-wide effort. Why is this so?

A major reason why minority languages currently receive so little attention, even where the political climate is favourable to such efforts, is that these communities have very little voice and so are not heard by

governments and aid agencies. Experience in Cameroon has shown that when a local coordinating committee is set up, it is possible first of all to generate some resources locally, and then to relate to national (and international) institutions in the search for the necessary means. National and international agencies will take seriously requests for help for such local programmes only when a high degree of local commitment is evident. Such a committee provides a bridge between the local community and the wider social context – and it is precisely at such linkage points that minority communities have been disadvantaged in the past.

Moreover, the very minority nature of such communities requires that there should be a body able to take decisions locally. Minority groups are distinctive in various ways – cultural patterns of behaviour, dynamics of relationships – and these must be considered in implementing any social change. While the outside perspective of a change agent is often helpful and even necessary for an objective appraisal of such cultural patterns, only the local community will have the expertise to organize and support a community-wide effort. Specifically, such a committee will be responsible for decisions relating to the development of the language in the early stages, for planning the structure of the literacy programme, for preparing and funding the yearly budget (including the raising of some local resources), for selecting those to be trained in various aspects of literacy, as well as for representing the programme to the outside. In terms of membership, it should represent the whole of the language community (various dialect areas, clans, villages, religious groupings) and be composed of those in whom a large proportion of the population can place their confidence.

LITERACY IN MINORITY LANGUAGES

- *depends on the will to communicate with every group, however small;*
- *must include adequate linguistic and motivational research;*
- *will be based in the local community, sustained by the local community;*
- *can lead to improved opportunities to develop human potential;*
- *respects and promotes cultural identity within the larger whole.*

The hopes for minority-language literacy do not rest, ultimately, on the availability of resources, for resources follow priorities. Such hopes depend rather on the value which we place on the identity of each community and, in the last analysis, of each individual, and on how worthwhile we believe it is to establish communication patterns with people which will give them the maximum opportunity to develop their own potential on their own terms.

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Clinton D.W. Robinson to the cause of Literacy. Mr Robinson works with the Société Internationale de Linguistique in Cameroon, where he has been involved in linguistic research, language development and the promotion of literacy in African languages. He is currently conducting research into the use of African languages in communication for rural development.

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